Voices from the Gaps

Beatriz Rivera

Biography

Beatriz Rivera was born on September 27, 1957 in Havana, Cuba to Aida Ruffin and Mario Rivera, who had been educated in Canada and owned an insurance business (Aldama 157). After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in early 1959 with Fidel Castro at the helm, Mario Rivera left the island in May 1960 and settled in Miami where Aida and Beatriz joined him six months later (Aldama 157). Although her parents remained married, Beatriz grew up witnessing their embittered relationship. Despite a troubled family life, it was those formative years in the Cuban exile community in South Florida that shaped Rivera's identity (Aldama 157). To escape a dysfunctional home, the author completed high school in Switzerland in what she jokingly describes as "an Alpine school for children with difficult parents." Not wanting to return home after graduating high school in 1974, Rivera moved to Paris to attend the Sorbonne. There she attained a Masters in Philosophy in 1980. She then became a pre-doctoral degree candidate in French and comparative literature (DEA), which she worked on as her schedule allowed in Paris and later in the United States until obtaining the degree in 1993. During her years in Paris, Rivera married a French philosophy student and fellow writer, Denis Beneich, whom she would eventually divorce after running off with Charles Barnes, the man who became her husband and the father of their two children, Nigel and Rebecca, born in 1988 and 1997, respectively.

The love affair with Barnes brought Rivera back to the United States. The couple settled in New York and later moved to New Jersey—first to Jersey City, where Rivera worked as a staff writer at The Jersey Journal from 1999 to 2001, and then to Union City. Both areas served as setting for her first novel. It was also at this time that Rivera entered a doctoral program in Hispanic literatures at The City University of New York (CUNY). She was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 2003 and began teaching language, literature and civilization courses at Penn State University, Worthington/Scranton.

Quick Facts

* Born in 1957
* Cuban-American novelist, short story writer, and academic

This page was researched and submitted by Gisela Norat, of Agnes Scott College, on 7/28/05.

Biography continued

With a perceptive sense of humor, Beatriz Rivera fleshes out intense, multifaceted female characters whose very obsessions humanize them. The assertive, man-hungry women common in Rivera's fiction may on the surface appear shallow, yet these college-educated Latinas straddle their mothers' generation and an Anglo culture with different norms of conduct and expectations, hence their skirmishes on the battlefield of acculturation. In Rivera's first book, *African Passions and Other Stories*, the need to satisfy the desire for career and marriage turns into grounds for conflict for several protagonists. No longer a topic of embarrassment, as in "Grandmother's Secret," the female libido ultimately churns the passion behind many of Rivera's plots.

The author depicts Latinas who unapologetically mimic male behavior. Trish Izquierdo in *Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express* lures her husband back after divorcing him, hijacks the relationship with her explosive jealousy and struggles to keep in check an assortment of sexual fantasies and other propensities —including the self-appointed role of town historian. Her best friend, Doris Otero, harbors a fixation for the Wayang husband she abandoned and for other lovers as well. Given the association "Wayang" conjures with both puppets and ancient tribes, Rivera suggests the primitive nature of sexuality at work in these overpowering female personalities who try —and often achieve—to manipulate men as marionettes. Playing with Light too has its cast of willful independent women, shrews and one cross-dresser.

Rivera presents motherhood as a point of contention in women's lives. In the short story volume and the two novels most mothers are self-absorbed, depressed and unhappy. Notably, both Trish and Rebecca's mothers each articulate their desire to "never wake up or "to die" (MS 150, PL 7). Nilda in "Life Insurance" has raised a mama's boy who she smothers well into adulthood; Miranda in "What Miranda Lost" destroys her family with her compulsion for wealth and status; Sara in "Once in a Lifetime Offering" pays more attention to her lover than her daughter; and the protagonist of "Paloma" abandons her children, at least, emotionally and psychologically to dwell in her fantasy life. Focusing exclusively on mother/daughter relationships in the novels, Rivera sows fertile ground for derailing fragile bonds with daughters who mainly get negative attention from their mothers.

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Dissatisfaction breeds anger, a recurring theme in Rivera's writing. Although exceptional women lash out with fury, most repress their feelings as dictated by society. Rebecca, for example, physically starves her anger and insecurities. Her old school friend Selene Machado always draws "a happy face in the 'o' of Machado," yet wants to secure a gun to shoot her husband. With key flashbacks to parents, Rivera suggests a look at the dysfunctional birth families of these Latinas—the case of Trish and Rebecca—as the root of poor adult relationships and mothering skills.

Despite the anger, or once it ebbs, Rivera's malcontent protagonists do contemplate their self-identity. The void they express leads a few to ponder ancestry in different ways. In "Once in a Lifetime Offering," Kiki surprises readers with a return to Cuba. Lacking a direct link to the island of her parents' birth, Trish in *Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express* decides to write or invent the history of West Echevarría, the New Jersey town of her birth. Her version of history or her story (her story) may provide a sense of belonging, a substitute for Cuban roots lost to exile. Trish's identity in limbo contrasts with her (ex)husband's clan who claims Euro-centric pedigree to the point of naming all males after famous explorers and conquistadors.

The attempt to recover history becomes an explicit part of the plot in *Playing with Light*. As the protagonist's Americanized name implies, Becky Atlkins, born Rebecca Barrios, risks losing her ethnic identity. The means for recuperating her (Cuban) history comes unexpectedly by way of an old photograph of a tertulia on the island. To recreate the reading salon of the Cuba that her father describes, the South Beach housewife organizes a reading club and chooses *Playing with Light* as the first book. For Rebecca the text turns into a bridge to the motherland.

Early in the novel the act of reading sustains the parallel plots between modern day Miami and the Havana of more than one hundred years ago. As a life-sustaining operation, reading turns into manna, for the reader, the audience or both. Among the examples, Rebecca, a voracious reader and anorexic, survives more on words than food. In taping chapters for friends, who are too busy to read the book themselves, she keeps the club "alive" with her readings. In his convalescence Rebecca's stroke-victim father reads the newspaper to the cat and discovers that it is the one thing that keeps him going and engaged in the world.

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In the concomitant story taking place in Havana another man, Umberto Barrios, is the lector, the Reader for the seamstresses in a dress factory. Reading energizes the women, stimulating them to work longer as they become absorbed in the storyline about a group of women in Miami one hundred years into the future. When Umberto Barrios stops reading María Fernanda, the factory owner's young niece, goes berserk on the factory floor as if the Reader were cutting her lifeline.

Eventually the parallel plots intersect. Rivera creates a complex text within which readers find a story of a family in the textile industry in Cuba and a family of Cuban exiles in Miami. The term "text" is the stem of "texere," to weave. Hence, the Miami and Havana stories turn out to be the warp and woof of the same textile, the same textual corpus. In this regard, the self-reflexive text attains the status of protagonist. In *Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express*, "everyone who knew Trish loved to say that she didn't know fact from fiction" (10). Rivera expertly manipulates this assertion in *Playing with Light*, a novel in which past, present and future conflate the lives of both fictional and historical characters in twentieth century Miami and nineteenth century Havana. In the interstices where light and shadow blur the tale of two cities Rebecca may find the key to her search for meaning.

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